

# BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 2 • Issue 2

American Civil War:

## Antietam

DATE:

September 17, 1862

LOCATION:

Sharpsburg, Western Maryland

### OPPOSING FORCES

38,000 troops of the **Confederate Army of Northern Virginia** under Gen. Robert E. Lee. Key subordinates were Lt. Gen. James Longstreet and Lt. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, each commanding a wing of the army.

75,000 troops of the **Union Army of the Potomac** under Gen. George B. McClellan. Corps commanders were Maj. Gens. Joseph Hooker, Edwin V. Sumner, Fitz John Porter, William B. Franklin, Ambrose Burnside, and Joseph K.F. Mansfield.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

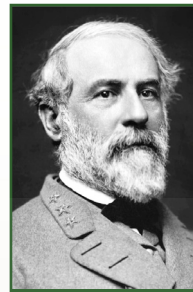
After a year and a half of fighting, the Confederacy held the military initiative in the Civil War. In the West, Confederate forces were on the march toward the Ohio River Valley. In the East, Gen. Robert E. Lee, who had recently assumed command of the Army of Northern Virginia, had just defeated Gen. John Pope's Union Army of Virginia in the Second Bull Run Campaign. During the late summer of 1862, Confederate forces launched their first invasion of the North. When Union forces met them near Sharpsburg, Maryland, along Antietam Creek, the result was the "bloodiest day" in American military history. Although the Battle of Antietam was a tactical draw, Union Gen. George McClellan stopped Lee's invasion. It was a significant enough strategic "victory" to discourage European intervention in the Civil War and for President Abraham Lincoln to broaden the moral aspects of the conflict by issuing his famous Emancipation Proclamation.

### STRATEGY & MANEUVER

**Actions by the Confederate Army** – By mid-1862, with their military fortunes ascendant, Confederate leaders looked to exploit recent battlefield victories. Lee and key subordinates, Lt. Gens. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson and James Longstreet, had recently guided the Army of Northern Virginia to a stunning victory in the Battle of Second Bull Run (Manassas). The Union's Army of the Potomac had since withdrawn to defensive positions around Washington, D.C.

Strategically, Lee looked northward, believing another major victory – this time on Northern soil – would pay dividends. Lee and Confederate President Jefferson Davis reasoned that a successful invasion of Union territory would accomplish several objectives. Virginia would receive a respite from the ravages of war, while the Confederacy would receive all the rich farmland in the

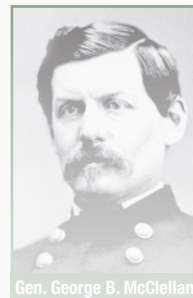
Additionally, the people of the border state of Maryland might rally to the Confederate flag, possibly prompting the state to join the Confederacy. And perhaps most importantly, a major victory on Northern soil might convince Great Britain and France to offer diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy, leading to direct military and economic support, or even a brokered peace.



Gen. Robert E. Lee

Lee planned to move into Maryland and concentrate his forces near Hagerstown by 12 September. If conditions proved favorable, he could advance into Pennsylvania, threatening the capital of Harrisburg and destroying the railroad bridge across the Susquehanna River. Eventually, he might menace Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Washington, D.C. On 4 September, Lee's army splashed across the Potomac River at White's Ford and moved into Maryland. (*Map 1*)

Lee expected two Federal garrisons in the Shenandoah Valley, 12,000 troops at Harpers Ferry and 2,500 at Martinsburg, to abandon their positions. When they did not, Lee was obliged to divide his army, sending Jackson to capture Harpers Ferry and secure his lines of communication and supply.



Gen. George B. McClellan

But Lee's campaign ran into difficulty early. Subduing Harpers Ferry was taking longer than expected. The local support he had counted on had failed to materialize. And worst of all, he received news from his cavalry that the Army of the Potomac was already moving toward him – while his army was divided! Although Lee knew McClellan was slow and deliberate, Lee's army was still vulnerable. Sensing disaster, Lee worked quickly to consolidate his forces, while he ordered

Longstreet to defend the South Mountain passes to slow the Federal advance. On the 14th, he ordered a general retirement across the Potomac.

However, hours later, after learning that Harpers Ferry would soon fall, Lee changed his mind. He rescinded the withdrawal order and directed his army to concentrate at Sharpsburg, Maryland. Later that day, as he rode with Longstreet across nearby Antietam Creek, he spotted a long, low ridge line to the east. "We will make our stand on these hills," he declared.

As he gathered on the 17th, Lee believed he would still outpace